

WASHINGTON – U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) today pledged to work with the State Department and the Eugene Bell Foundation to develop a plan to reunite Korean-Americans with family in North Korea should the U.S. normalize relations with the DPRK. Kirk's statement came after the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed the National Defense Authorization Act Conference Report today (H.R. 1585), which contained a requirement for the President to report to Congress within 180 days on the status of divided Korean families and a plan to facilitate reunification should relations between the U.S. and North Korea continue to thaw.

Kirk serves as co-chair of the bipartisan Congressional Commission on Divided Families and as a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State-Foreign Operations, which funds all State Department operations.

"All too often we forget the human face of North Korea and the devastating impact the regime's policies have taken on ordinary Korean-Americans," said Kirk, the only member of Congress to travel to every province in North Korea. "Now more than 50 years since the Korean conflict divided a nation, Republicans and Democrats are working together to reunite constituents with loved ones in North Korea."

More than 1,000 families have come forward to report family in North Korea. The Commission, made up of 10 Republicans and Democrats, is working with the Eugene Bell Foundation to document cases of divided families and urge the North Korean government to allow these families to unite.

One victim, 66-year-old Chahee Stanfield, applauded today's House vote as a watershed moment for the divided Korean family movement.

"This is a historical moment for which Korean-American divided families have waited more than 50 years," said Stanfield, a Chicago librarian who was five years old when she last saw her father and older brother. "The divided family members are in their 70s, 80s, and 90s, and every day makes a difference."

According to the Congressional Research Service, between 100,000 and 500,000

Korean-Americans still have family living in North Korea. Most have not seen their loved ones since the end of the Korean War, while many have not seen family members since World War II.

The Congressional Commission on Divided Families is the first official mechanism inside the U.S. government to directly engage with the North Korean government on the issue of family reunification.

In the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries, elderly Korean-Americans are forced to contact relatives without the protection of a U.S. embassy or the State Department. Families are at the mercy of the black market smuggling rings that control access to North Korea.

Pictures of Chahee Stanfield and her family are available upon request.

The report language is included below:

SEC. 1265.

REPORT ON FAMILY REUNIONS BETWEEN UNITED STATES CITIZENS AND THEIR RELATIVES IN NORTH KOREA.

(a) REPORT REQUIRED.—Not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall transmit to Congress a report on family reunions between United States citizens and their relatives in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

(b) ELEMENTS.—The report under subsection (a) shall include the following:

(1) A description of the efforts, if any, of the United States Government to facilitate family reunions between United States citizens and their relatives in North Korea, including the following:

(A) Discussing with North Korea family reunions between United States citizens and their relatives in North Korea.

(B) Planning, in the event of a normalization of relations between the United States and North Korea, for the appropriate role of the United States embassy in Pyongyang, North Korea, in facilitating family reunions between United States citizens and their relatives in North Korea.

(2) A description of additional efforts, if any, of the United States Government to facilitate family reunions between United States citizens and their relatives in North Korea that the President considers to be desirable and feasible.